

IN MEMORIAM

ZMAGO ŠMITEK
(29.11.1949–15.9.2018)



Koper, 2012

In the early autumn, at a time when he usually departed for his yearly journey, Dr Zmago Šmitek, *professor emeritus* at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana and our dear friend, mentor, co-worker, and lecturer, departed forever.

Zmago Šmitek is undoubtedly one of the most noted and prolific Slovene ethnologists and cultural anthropologists. Born in Kropa in the region of Gorenjska in 1949, he completed high school in Kranj and enrolled at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, where he studied ethnology and art history. After graduating in 1973, he was employed at the Department of Ethnology, and by 1995 obtained the title of Full Professor of Non-European Ethnology and Anthropology of Religion. Having procured his successors, who took over courses on the ethnology of other continents, he was finally able to focus exclusively on classes in Ethnology of Asia and the Anthropology of Religion. Although retired since the end of 2010, he remained active and continued with his scientific research.

Following the publication of his book on the municipality of Kočevje (*Občina Kočevje*, 1981) and a chapter in the book on ethnological aspects of life in Vitanje (*Kruh in politika: Poglavje iz etnologije Vitanja / Bread and Politics: Chapters from the Ethnology of Vitanje*, 1987), his main scientific interest turned to contacts of Slovenes with non-European cultures, a theme he followed for many decades. This particular exploration resulted in a series of essays and monographs, including an anthology of Slovene travelogues about non-European topics (*Poti do obzorja: Antologija slovenskega potopisa z neevropsko tematiko / The Paths Towards the Horizon: Anthology of Slovene Travelogue with Non-European Thematic*, 1988); Slovene encounters with the difference: Slovene experiences of the exotic (*Srečevanja z drugačnostjo: Slovenska izkustva eksotike*, 1995); and *Southern Slavs and India Relations in Oral Traditions* (2011). His book on encounters of Slovenes with non-European cultures (*Klic daljnih svetov: Slovenci in neevropske culture / The Call of Distant Worlds: Slovenes and Non-European Cultures*, 1986) received the distinguished Kajuh Award.

Although he was also interested in theoretical issues, his particular area of scientific research, especially in more recent years, was Slovene mythology, a subject that also brought him wider recognition. His exploration of mythology was done comparatively, in the context of Slavic and wider Indo-European mythology. After 1997, he published a number of essays and books on mythical notions in Slovene folklore: *Kristalna gora: Mitološko izročilo Slovencev* (1998); *Mitološko izročilo Slovencev: Svetinje preteklosti* (2004), for which he received in 2005 the renowned Murko Award; and *Poetika in logika slovenskih mitov: Ključi kraljestva (Poetics and Logic of Slovene Myths: The keys to the Kingdoms* 2012). In 2016, he published a book on mandalas titled *Mandale: tajni vrtovi razsvetljenja (Mandalas: Sacred Gardens of Enlightenment)*, which was the result of four decades of his travels around Asia. In total, he was the author, co-author and editor or co-editor of almost thirty books and wrote over 130 scientific and professional articles.

In addition to his scientific activity, he organized several museum exhibitions, participated in the making of a number of documentaries, and also wrote several booklets on Slovene folklore, intended for children. Dr Šmitek was among the initiators and co-organizers of MESS, the international Mediterranean Ethnological Summer School. Organized by the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, MESS first took place in 1994 and continued on a yearly basis for sixteen years, always in Piran. For several years Šmitek served as the head of the Department of Ethnology, was a member of a number of editorial boards of ethnological reviews, participated in numerous domestic and international conferences, and similar events.

Just a few days before his death, he completed his last book titled *Še lest divjine (Rustling of the Wilderness* 2019). It is, of course, impossible to fully present his rich bibliography and adequately evaluate his impressive body of work in this limited space, but we can safely say that his scientific achievements are invaluable for our profession. The golden Plaque of the University of Ljubljana for Outstanding Merits, which he received in 1999 for his exceptional merits, and the highest professional award, the 2013 Murko Award for his lifetime achievements in the field of ethnology, were certainly well-deserved.

However, to write about Zmago Šmitek only as an excellent scholar and university professor would not do him justice – he was so much more than just that. He was a mentor who, even at the very beginning of our professional career, always gave us, his students, the feeling that we were equal, that our ideas mattered, and that our opinion was appreciated. He was a colleague to whom rivalry and desire for power were absolutely alien, and with whom even the most arduous fieldwork seemed like just another fun adventure. He was a friend whose wisdom could dispel any seemingly fatal problem. Above all, he was also an extremely broad-minded man with a sense of humour that could soothe any tense situation.

On September 15, 2018, just two months before his sixty-ninth birthday, our respected colleague and friend responded to the call of distant worlds for the last time. His co-workers, students, friends, and readers of his fascinating books shall sorely miss him.

Mirjam Mencej

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